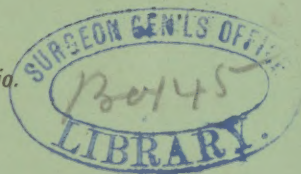


Black (J. R.)

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EXTENSION OF SYPHILIS.

By J. R. BLACK, M. D., Newark, Ohio.



Read and published by request of the Zanesville Academy of Medicine.

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I need scarcely say that the part you have assigned me in this discussion upon syphilis is one of peculiar difficulty. It does not simply involve a description or a question of the relations of certain morbid phenomena to each other, but of nice, social, moral, sanitary and jurisprudential powers, possibilities and duties that arise in reference to a great public evil—the prevention of the diffusion of the syphilitic contagia from person to person. And, apart from these nice points in ethics lies another peculiar difficulty: the private and secret nature of the evil or disease, whose spread it is desired openly to counteract. In most diseases with which the sanitarian has to deal, there are no motives in those suffering by them for concealment, on the contrary, they and their friends are eager to let it be known, especially to those on whom reliance is placed for help, or as a hindrance to their diffusion. All is different in the case of syphilis; and just when, where or how the sanitarian can best and most effectually put his hand to stay the progress of this social plague-spot, are questions requiring the most careful judgment, and, moreover, demanding the most anxious consideration.

There are none of us, who are fathers, who do not anxiously realize that our sons may, at any moment, be led during some youthful folly to contract the syphilitic blight, withering the very gemmules of life and all its bright prospects in its poisonous embrace. Many, very many, of the mysterious suicides committed during the prime time of life are wholly the result of the inroads of this fearful malady upon the body. I shall never forget the fate of a brilliant young stu-

dent of mine, a native of your county, who, in a moment of hot-blooded weakness, yielded to the seductions of a cyprian, contracting syphilis, which became the shadowing burden of his mind by day and by night, and the cause of his madness and incarceration within the walls of a lunatic asylum.

Undoubtedly, one of the great problem of problems in the different phases of our morbid social dynamics is how to diminish or extirpate syphilis, without at the same time countenancing vice—how to wage a warfare of extermination against a fearful disease without encouraging the immorality upon which its extension depends.

Long ago, France adopted the method of registering and examining periodically the persons of the females in her houses of ill-fame, in the endeavor to limit the spread of syphilis. To say the least, the system has not worked out the sanitary advantages desired; or, in other words, has proved but a partial success. It is even claimed that it has wholly failed in its purpose, besides doing great moral detriment by a legal recognizance, and a removal of some of the impedients to illicit intercourse.

Be the facts on this head as they may, it is not my purpose to discuss them, inasmuch as the moral sentiment of our country is overwhelmingly against the adoption of the French system. Yet the fact can not be disputed that this system has in it an element of good, the aim to prevent the spread of a terrible malady, and one, too, in which the proportion of innocent sufferers is fully as great, if not greater, than the guilty. I refer, of course, to the communication of the disease by husbands to virtuous wives, and its entailment upon innocent children. But it is said, and with some truth, that if the fear of contracting this terrible disease were removed by legal or other supervision, the result would be to foster and encourage the prevalence of illicit intercourse. I can not reckon the argument as entirely legitimate; in fact, if it proves anything, it proves too much. It proves that no attempt should be made to cure it in the guilty—they should be left to suffer and to die as an illustrated warning to others not to copy their example.

The blazoned advertisements we see in almost every issue of the daily press: "private diseases radically cured," gives quite as much moral encouragement to prostitution as any system of registration and inspection, imperfect as it necessarily is as a safeguard against this disease. And, by the way, in this matter of the relation of disease to sin, sin in some form against natural laws, nine-tenths of the ills that

flesh is heir to, have such an origin. The business of the physician would be light, indeed, if he had only diseases to deal with which were righteously contracted. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

In view of the sound objections to the French system, Dr. Sims, the late President of the American Medical Association, in his retiring address, after delineating in a very graphic manner the terrible and almost ineradicable ravages of syphilis, recommended another plan to limit or suppress it, which, he says, is "so simple and so evident that I only wonder it was not done long ago." His plan is to deal with the disease precisely as sanitary authorities now deal with cholera or small-pox. The proposition does not appear to have been well received, and chiefly on the ground of its utter impracticability. And, certainly, it is open to this charge, putting it in the shape he did, and leaving it, as he left it, in the form of a general proposition. Let us, for a moment, consider how it would work if an attempt were made to apply it according to the sound sanitary principle he announces for our guidance: "*That contagious diseases can be controlled by isolation of the sick and the destruction of the contagia.*" In the first place he altogether ignores the difference between ferreting out a case of cholera and a case of syphilis. There are shame, disgrace, and urgent motives for concealment in the one case, and none in the other. There are potent motives for the physician and the friends of one sick with syphilis to keep the matter secret, while there are none such in a case of cholera. Certainly, if health officers or the sanitary police could ferret out syphilis in the face of such obstacles, their ferreting power must pass all human understanding. But, suppose the syphilitics to be thus detected, the next thing, according to the doctor's proposition, is to have them isolated. Imagine all the syphilitics in a great city isolated; if at their homes, it would take a considerable standing army to keep them there; if at one or two vast pest-houses, there would be immense indignation, open rebellion, and a great expense in awaiting the tedious destruction of the contagia of a disease so chronic as syphilis. If physicians were required by law to report every case of syphilis to the proper authorities, in order to effect its isolation, how many, think you, could be induced to obey? If some, more conscientious than others, did obey, they would soon find all that kind of business drifting out of their hands, and into those less scrupulous, thus defeating the very object of the requirement. The scheme is thus seen to be almost absurd in its impracticability, and deserves to fall, as it must, into speedy oblivion.

Syphilis being eminently a private disease, and yet one extremely disastrous to the general welfare, ruining the health of tens of thousands for life, and leaving a fearful impress upon innocent children to third and fourth generations, helping to fill our alms-houses, hospitals and asylums with wretches in most deplorable conditions, and endowing the world of humans with an amount of misery and despair beyond all the attempts of human cognition to grasp; it seems, in view of all this, that if there be any means whereby its prevalence can be lessened, without at the same time nursing the viper of promiscuous intercourse into renewed life, such means should be put into immediate execution.

Let us get at the root of the evil, and endeavor to discover the cause of its extension. A man, to gratify an animal desire, consciously risks the danger of infection, or the woman through hire does the same thing. In either case one of the two frequently deceives the other, by which a blighting disease is communicated. Now, the question for the sanitarian to meet in such a case is not the legality or morality of this animal gratification, but how to prevent the extension of a contagious malady. If he can do this without offense to law or injury to morals, the problem is well nigh solved.

As houses of prostitution are the channels through which the contagion is chiefly maintained and extended, at such places must the battle be fought for its limitation or destruction. The weekly inspection of the female inmates can not meet the danger, as trained experience and the results of its adoption have clearly shown. Those who have had much to do with syphilis, well know that from an apparently insignificant abrasion, not very conspicuous even on the easily inspected male organs of generation, a whole train of dreadful sequelæ may ensue. The detection of such an abrasion in the female organs, in every case, is simply impossible. Suppose this abrasion to be just within the cervix, suppose it be on a little fold of the mucous membrane around the neck, on the posterior cul-de-sac, or on some of the ruga of the vagina, ten to one it would escape observation. And whenever it does, of course the protection of such examinations against the contagion is simply a sham and a delusion.

Or suppose, as must often happen, that a woman has connection at one time of the day or night with a man who has an infecting chancre, and in a short time after with one, two or three other healthy persons; what will be likely to occur? Why, of course, that the last named will be very likely to contract the disease, and all this may happen not once, but twice or

thrice, in the interims between examinations. Obviously, this mode of preventing the extension of a contagious disease is strikingly imperfect.

After much reflection I see but one practicable device by which the sanitarian can meet the evil. The first requisite is a suitable law—a contagious disease act—prohibiting any one from aiding or facilitating the spread of contagious diseases, and prescribing certain penalties against every householder who knowingly permits or who fails to take the proper precautions against the communication of dangerous contagions from one person to another within his or her domicile. These precautions should be uniform, conveyed in plain, clear language, and drawn up by the authorized sanitary officers of the state. By them, they should be distributed to the health officers of every town or city for the proper observance and enforcement of the contagious disease act. The local health officers should be made the responsible executives of the law, attending to all the requirements for the limitation or suppression of contagion in their respective towns or cities; and in case of any householder's non-compliance, should appear as prosecuting witness against offenders.

As it is the business of every vigilant health officer to keep a watchful eye over all real or suspected foci of contagion, so in the instance of syphilis should he exercise over every house of prostitution an especial surveillance, as an occasional but sure disseminator of a dangerous contagious disease. In the furtherance of this end the first thing done should be to distribute to every house of the kind, a printed slip of the *requirements* made by the contagious disease act and the *precautions* prescribed by the sanitary officials for its enforcement. In brief the provisions of the act should be as follows:

1. The prohibition and penalties against the spread of the syphilitic or other contagion.

2. The requirements made of each householder, so that no member thereof shall endanger or propagate contagion to others.

3. The *precautions* prescribed by sanitary authority, needful to prevent visitors from communicating disease to any member of a household.

These precautions are the important point, and should be clearly stated by the sanitary officers of the state under the authority of the contagious disease act, in effect as follows: every separate room or householder justly open to the suspicion of allowing illicit intercourse in his or her domicile, should be required to examine ocularly all male visitors, who by words

or deeds display an intention of exposing any of the inmates to the contagia of a private disease, in order to determine whether such visitors are wholly free from any appearance or indication of the syphilitic contagion in those parts of the body most commonly affected by it, or in other words, whether such parts are wholly free from all kinds of eruptions, sores, ulcers, inflammations or breaks in the skin or mucous membrane of whatever kind; and if not thus free, to summarily eject such visitors from the house as the common carriers of a dangerous contagion and so prevent its communication to any of the inmates. In brief, I would advocate male inspection at every house of ill-fame by its manager, and the prompt ejection of all infected persons therefrom; and in cases of a householder's non-compliance, to treat the delinquent as a violator of the contagious disease act, with punishment, on conviction, by fine or imprisonment, or both.

In support of the entire feasibility of this plan, this much may be said: the sanitary aim and object would harmonize with the interests and wishes of the occupants of every disreputable house, none of them wishing to contract such a loathesome disease, and the plan might therefore be fairly expected to gain their co-operation. As a safeguard against the spread of this contagion, male inspection has this very important advantage over female; there can be no difficulty in perceiving the disease—no expert would be required to detect it, even in its incipient stages. Any one with a good pair of eyes can see a pimple, an abrasion, ulcer or inflammation on the prepuce or glans penis, or a suspicious sore on the lips; and when seen, to say, "sir, you are a dangerous person, you are forbidden my house." Moreover, the examinations would be as frequent as the visits to houses of ill-fame, so that there would be no danger of extending the disease, as in the interims between examinations under the French system of female inspection at regular intervals. Besides, men would soon learn to absent themselves while diseased, as their presence would only serve to make more public their odious infirmity. Nor can any valid objections be made to the shame to visitors to such houses of being regularly subjected to such an indelicate examination. Those who so far demean themselves as to become the habitués of such places, ought to be prepared for anything. On the other hand, this much may be said in its favor, that many young men would be deterred by the shame and indignation of such an examination from ever entering a house of the kind; and this too, at a time of all others the most efficacious in preventing vicious conduct,

or before the first plunge is made into a career of vice. Nor is it reasonable to suppose that prosecutions against those who have disregarded the contagious disease act would seldom or never occur. Every physician has seen men so wrought upon by the indignation and despair of having contracted syphilis, that they would be prepared from the pure motive of revenge to appear as witnesses against the author of their woes. Besides, the threats which would be often uttered by visitors against the inmates of houses of ill-fame, of putting the law in force against them should any contagion be contracted, would have the effect of inducing them, from the impulse of self-protection, to comply with the requirements of the law and the precautions of the sanitary authorities.

The great objection can not be urged against this plan that it would give any legal or moral countenance to the act of prostitution. The deed may and should stand as an illegal one, open, as before, to punishment by the hand of the law. All that it is proposed to do, is to put such houses under sanitary surveillance, as the special propagators or centers of a dangerous disease. It simply puts them in the category of places that should be under sanitary surveillance, or as the frequent sources of an important danger to public health, to the end that, if irrepressible, they may at least be placed under a cross-fire of law, and thus deprive them as much as possible of the power to propagate and perpetuate an evil which in character, intensity and far-reaching effects is without an equal.

